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## ABSTRACT

Situational Reinforcement, a teaching methodology developed out of the cognitive-field theory of learning, is described. It combines many techniques and methods developed over the years. This discussion of it considers common learning problems: (1) boredom, apathy and passivity on the part of the student, (2) the teacher's preoccupation with mistakes and the concomitant inhibition of the student, and (3) the inability of the student to communicate in the target language. The source of these three difficulties is seen as the tendency in our society to divorce learning from real-life experiences. "Situational Reinforcement" is a method of learning various skills by reinforcing ideas and concepts through actually doing those things in real-life situations. It could be called a psycho-motor or kinesthetic approach to learning languages. The disadvantage of the methodology is in the area of testing. However, the method, which is geared to results, attacks the problems outlined above. There is progressive movement from a teacher-centered class toward a student-centered one. There is also progression in the format of the material to be learned in the course of a chapter from the American to the foreign milieu, from one language skill to another, with the emphasis always on personalizing communication. (AMH)

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## SITUATIONAL REINFORCEMENT: NEW OLD WAY TO LEARN LANGUAGE

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You must be wondering what this paradoxical title means: "THE NEW OLD WAY. . . ." As language teachers, as teachers, we've seen methods come and go, methods in languages, in math, in other subjects as well. They're usually based on a gimmick and introduced with a flourish and a lot of hoopla and often forced upon us by administrators who've been sold on them by eager salesmen. So we give them a try, and then after a few years everybody pretty much agrees that the method doesn't work out so well as promised, and it fades from the scene. And there we are back at square one, doing what we always wanted to do in the first place, what we have been doing for years, what we know works. Where did we get in all that?

Well, I've now found a method that is new only in that it combines all those good techniques that teachers have used and developed on their own and have used in their classes sometimes without even realizing it, so much have they become part of their nature, techniques to make their class interesting, to make it real, to make it lively, to keep it going and to keep the students learning, to get the students to communicate with each other, techniques that have not been developed just in the last few years but that good teachers always have been using. These are things so commonsensical that one wonders why no one had put them all together before and just written a book using those techniques. I've discovered a methodology now and a publisher that actually do these things, that actually put these techniques into textbooks and make them the core of the materials. This methodology is Situational Reinforcement.<sup>1</sup>

### Learning Problems

What are some of the learning problems that we as teachers face in the classroom, and does Situational Reinforcement help remedy those problems? The three main problems are: 1. boredom, apathy, and passivity on the part of the student who expects to sit back and be entertained; 2. our preoccupation with mistakes and the concomitant inhibition of the student; 3. the inability of the student actually to communicate in the language. The students have had the grammar, but they have trouble discussing. They can do all the exercises in the book, but as soon as they close the book they have trouble putting together sentences of their

own. They have trouble communicating and applying what they have learned to a real-life situation and to one that is different from what they had in the book.

I'd like to zero in on what I think is the heart of the problem. I think it is that we have in our society undone the natural learning process that civilization up until the 20th century took for granted. We have in our society divorced learning from real-life experiences; we have created a dichotomy between the two. By placing learning in a special setting, the school, and making it a compulsory experience and by shrouding learning in unproven theories, we have forgotten some very simple and common-sense rules. While we have tried to make learning into a science, we have conveniently forgotten simply that one learns by doing, one learns through the school of hard knocks, so to speak. We and the parents have wanted to protect children from the real world and life experiences that their parents and grandparents had and learned from, just as parents have attempted to protect their children from experiencing want and hard work, and so forth. And so we have separated learning from life. We now have the idea that you learn only in school, only through books, and only through the teacher.

As a corollary to that we have also forgotten that children learn from each other, that children of varying ages, levels, abilities, and learning rates learn from each other. Instead, we see this variety and disparity in students as an obstacle in the classroom and say, "We can't teach this class, because they all have different backgrounds; they're all learning at different rates," and so on. However, Situational Reinforcement uses this variety to capitalize on what children do naturally outside the classroom and what they used to do in the one-room schoolhouse. Outside the classroom they naturally help each other; they teach each other games; they learn from each other. Children of different ages play together. They teach each other many things about life, and they learn extremely well from each other facts of life and, all too well, misfacts of life. However, in the classroom, we tell them they can't do that. They've got to learn from us and from a book.

### Definition of Situational Reinforcement

The first way to describe Situational Reinforcement would be to start with its name. Situational Reinforcement is a method of

<sup>1</sup> Delivered at the Spring 1977 Conference of PSMLA.

learning various skills by reinforcing ideas and concepts through actually doing those things in real-life situations. In other words, one learns by doing. Another way to describe it is to call it an experiential way of learning languages. This means that the student experiences everything that he or she says. One could also call it a psycho-motor or kinesthetic approach to learning languages, and that would mean again that the student does something at the same time that he or she is talking about that thing. The student does not just do pattern-practice drills or substitution exercises or translations. The student does things, is involved, participates and is an active participant, is not passive. Situational Reinforcement attempts to reunite life and learning within the framework of the classroom, to make students learn from their life experiences, and then after experiencing something to abstract from that, to develop principles, rules, etc., from that experience. Situational Reinforcement is a new way to learn grammar. The primary goal is communication, and grammar is a tool to be used to reach that goal. First the student learns the grammar in context and by doing. And then the student abstracts the rules, describes how the language works. Here you have in a nutshell a variety of descriptions of Situational Reinforcement.

### Two Main Concepts of Learning

To understand Situational Reinforcement a bit better and the problems that we face in the classroom a bit better, let us look briefly at the learning situation. Psychologists tell us that there are two main concepts of learning. The first one is stimulus-response or associationism. This is something that developed out of the experiments of Pavlov in Russia, Watson, Thorndike, and B. F. Skinner in the United States. What we are talking about is operant conditioning, behavior modification, giving a stimulus (a cue) and getting a certain desired response and selectively reinforcing the responses. From this stimulus-response approach comes the audio-lingual, ALM method, where the teacher feeds a cue to the student and the student responds automatically. We keep reinforcing those correct answers through pattern-practice sentences and repetition, constantly reinforcing the desired terminal behavior.

The second way of approaching learning is through the cognitive-field theory, also called cognitive-code learning. This has developed principally out of the work of the Gestalt psychologists in Germany, Köhler, for example, and in America, Lewin and Bruner. This theory is based on an insight approach, on learning things in context and as a whole, seeing the interdependent relationships involved in learning something. One learns by interdependent clusters of material rather than isolated,

individual components. Out of this second theory of learning, cognitive-field theory, has developed Situational Reinforcement.

### Demonstration of Two Methods

For you to see better the differences between these two approaches to learning and the problems inherent in them, it would be helpful for us to have a class here, for me to demonstrate, say, the same point as taught in audio-lingual, ALM class and then in a Situational Reinforcement class. However, I do not have a class here to demonstrate for you. But I have come up with something that I think will be just as effective as seeing two classes with these two methods. You'll have to use your imagination a little to help me with this. What I'm going to do is to place you outside of a field that you know, have you see a learning situation with a different skill and a way to teach that skill according to different methods of learning. Then I'll have you judge for yourself and see for yourself which you think is more interesting, more effective, more practical.

I'd like you to place yourself now in three positions: that of the learner, that of the teacher, and that of the impartial observer. As I said, since I don't have a class here and since it would be extremely difficult to simulate one here, what I will do is discuss or teach by analogy a skill that is so basic, so primary, so rudimentary that we don't think about it. And yet the same principles apply in teaching that skill that apply in teaching another skill, language. The skill and situation is very simply that of teaching students to walk.

[Here follows a ten-minute demonstration of the stimulus-response and the Situational Reinforcement approach for teaching walking with an imaginary class.]

Looking at this brief example of teaching a skill, we can see now why those problems we mentioned earlier exist in the learning situation: the question of boredom on the part of the student, the problem of mistakes and inhibition and the problem of the student's inability often to perform a certain skill when the student needs to in a real-life situation. We have divorced our learning from a real-life situation by making that skill so analytical, so scientific, so esoteric, and by placing so much emphasis on learning those names and parts of the body rather than learning the skill itself that we have lost sight of the skill and produced in the process that bored attitude and behavior on the part of the student.

### Drawbacks of Situational Reinforcement

Now I think you can see from this brief example which of the methods is more effective, which is more practical, which is based on reality, and which is producing results. But let

us say we are going to compare the two classes now. We'll give them a test to measure their knowledge. We'll make up a test that has tensed to be transformed, that has multiple-choice questions, a test that has pattern-practice exercises, a test that has substitution, translation, perhaps, and so forth, and a test that asks the students to reproduce the dialogue. Obviously, the students who have been prepared that way will do extremely well on that kind of test. The Situational Reinforcement students will probably not do very well on that kind of test. *But* how valid is that test in testing whether these students can or cannot walk? See, what you've done is lose sight of the goal, which is walking. You've lost sight of the process, and you've got "hung up" on its components and testing about its components instead of learning and practicing the process itself. To use another analogy, you don't learn to play the piano by practicing on the violin every day. You learn to play the piano by playing the piano. You don't learn to walk by *talking* about walking. You learn to walk by doing it. And that is the principle behind Situational Reinforcement. Now, as you can see, you do not worry in Situational Reinforcement about learning the various names for the components. Instead, you learn to do the process, the skill, whatever it is, and use the components in context.

Obviously, the Situational Reinforcement students will learn each part of the component less than perfectly, but those parts will be gradually polished as the students increase their experience with the skill. Situational Reinforcement is a much more difficult method for the student, and it is much more demanding for the student than the mechanical stimulus-response method.

#### Advantages of Situational Reinforcement

The students are constantly involved, are participating, are no longer passive, cannot sit back and daydream. They have got to perform and produce results. Situational Reinforcement is geared to results. Now, you as observers, what do you think is the role of the student, what is the role of the teacher in these two methods? Which method is more interesting? Which is more practical? Which is more likely to be applied to real-life situations? The Situational Reinforcement! Why? Because you are actually reproducing the real-life situation in the classroom. You have reunited learning and life. You are practicing what you want to learn and not just reading about it.

What is the students' motivation going to be like in the two methods? In the stimulus-response, audio-lingual method the students can become very easily bored once they have been able to manipulate those sentences and know that all they have to do is fill in that slot *he*

and *his muscles* and *she* and *her muscles* and *we* and *our muscles*. It is much easier to sit back and do that than actually to get up and to perform the skill. The students can respond without thinking or feeling. But what kind of position will those students be in when they actually need to perform that skill outside the classroom, when they are called upon to walk, or to talk and communicate in our case?

#### Learning Problems Reviewed

Now if we go back to the classroom problems we raised at the beginning of this talk and look at the question of boredom, for example, in which method is the student more likely to be bored? If the student is involved, if the student is participating, the student is not going to have time to be bored, because you've got his attention; you've captured and focused his attention. So the tediousness and boredom that are produced very often by the stimulus-response, audio-lingual method are replaced by task-oriented activities in the Situational Reinforcement classroom.

The second problem, the emphasis on mistakes and correction of mistakes and producing the desired correct behavior in the stimulus-response method, is replaced by seeing those mistakes in perspective, by seeing whether or not they impede the student from reaching the goal of walking or communicating. In other words, the mistake is put in its proper place. Correcting all mistakes is not the important thing; the important thing is attaining the goal; perfection of the parts can come as we go along.

The third problem that we defined in the learning situation is that the students have trouble in communicating. They can do the exercises, but they can't communicate well. There is little transfer of learning from the classroom to the real world or spontaneous conversation. Comparing the two methods as you've just seen them, which do you think will be more practical? The Situational Reinforcement, obviously, because we have bridged the gap between the two worlds; we have produced the desired behavior in the classroom. Walking is what they do, not just talking about walking.

Now, it all seems to make such good sense; it all seems to be so clear. You say, "Why haven't we done this before?" We have as teachers certain built-in defense mechanisms and reflexes about this whole matter. We have more or less been conditioned, as it were, to think that we are not producing good students if they can't reproduce all the paradigms and can't do well on the standardized written tests and can't do all those substitution exercises on split-second timing and can't name all the parts of speech and identify them in a sentence. We ourselves have lost sight of the goal.

For example, if we say that a student has not learned all the forms of a common irregular verb, we think, my goodness, that is terrible! We no longer see in the same terms once we put this situation into a field that we know. When we are detached and view the learning situation in a field that is not ours and we are impartial observers, we can see clearly and in better perspective which educational practices are more effective, which are more interesting.

#### **Example of Situational Reinforcement With a Language**

Now let us make that bridge, let us make that transfer to using the Situational Reinforcement method in teaching a language. Let me show you an example of how you would actually use this method in teaching language. Since you all teach different foreign languages, it is going to be impractical for me to use a particular one. So what I will do is use English as my example. Of course, the demonstration won't be nearly so effective using English as it would in using, say, Spanish or French or Italian or German, because we don't have the same kinds of problems. We don't have the major differences between the imperfect tense and the present-perfect tense in English, for example. We also don't have all the different endings of the present-tense verb according to whether it is "I", "we", "you", etc. But you will still see, using English, as the example, how the method operates with a language.

We've decided for our hypothetical lesson that the terminal behavior is going to be learning the past tense of the verb "to open." In the audio-lingual method we would first have a dialogue with forms of the verb "to open", and then we would do our substitution and pattern-practice sentences based on that. Here are some audio-lingual exercises. From the dialogue we have taken the model sentence: "Pierre and Marie opened the window." Repeat after me: "Pierre and Marie opened the window." Repeat again: "Pierre and Marie opened the window." OK. Now that you have assimilated the model, let's do some substitutions: /the purse/the door/the briefcase/the filecabinet / the refrigerator / the curtain / the store/ the deskdrawer/. Pattern sentence no. 2: "We opened the window." Repeat after me: "We opened the window." Substitutions: /the purse/the door/the briefcase/the filecabinet/ the refrigerator/ the store/ the deskdrawer/.

Pattern sentence no. 3: "They opened the window." Repeat after me: "They opened the window." Repeat again: "They opened the window." OK, Mary, repeat after me. Now, substitutions: /the purse/the door/the briefcase/the filecabinet/the refrigerator/the store/ the deskdrawer/. And so on. And then we go on to pattern-practice sentence no. 4, 5, 6, etc., all based on the dialogue.

With Situational Reinforcement, how do you think the verb to "open" would be taught? What I do is start out with a sequence-response, and I would model it while actually doing the things I am talking about. I would use only those things I could actually perform the action with or draw or show in a picture. I would modify my sentence to fit the reality of the situation around me. Instead of repeating a sentence about imaginary characters opening an imaginary window I would open the window. Instead of repeating a sentence about opening a briefcase I would open a briefcase. I would do those things once or twice, enough so the student would have the idea, because the words are in the foreign language; the student has never seen them before, and the books are closed. Then I would immediately ask the students to do the same actions and ask them what they had done. As they are saying the sentence, they would be performing the action. They are to associate the words with the action. Then they ask each other to do it. Then they break up into groups according to ability or whatever criterion the teacher has decided upon, and there they do variations suggested by the book or that they create. Instead of just opening a purse and having each student open a purse they would do various things. They would find other things in the room that they can open and close or they can talk about and expand upon. What I will do is encourage them to be creative and say, "OK. Open your purse, take out your wallet, open your wallet, take out your pictures", and so forth. What they are doing is communicating with each other, interacting with each other, learning from each other, instead of just manipulating words in a mechanical way. As you can see, what they are doing in the situation is reinforcing the concept to be taught. Then, after the students have done all this, they would be asked to analyze the verb I point out to them. What they have been dealing with is an imperative: "Open!" They also had various forms of the past tense: a past tense in the first, second, and third persons: What did you do? What did he do? I opened. He opened. Now in most of the foreign languages the forms would be different for the various persons. As you can see from this, the student is learning the grammar in context. Boredom is cut down, absenteeism is reduced, and interest is increased.

#### **Evolution of Format With Situational Reinforcement**

There is a progression in two areas: One, in the format of the class, that is to say, in the relationship between the teacher and the students; two, in the format of the material learned in the course of a chapter. One, the format of the class: whenever new material is introduced,

there is interaction between a limited number of students and the teacher, who act out those sequences. The teacher is just there initially to introduce the material. The instructor then withdraws from direct participation as soon as possible, encouraging the students to work with the sequence in groups among themselves. The sequence is not a dialogue to be memorized. The students don't have to memorize where the door is or what they did to it. Secondly, there is interaction among the students within that group without the teacher. Thirdly, the students from that group each form a new group in which they become the teacher, and then there is peer-teaching. So, we have moved naturally and progressively from a teacher-centered situation to a student-centered one. The students become responsible for their learning experience while being guided into it by the teacher.

In addition to the progression in classroom format there is a progression in the learning materials in the chapter. The lesson begins with the identification of tangible objects in the students' immediate environment. Next, the student handles those objects, describes what he or she and others are doing. Then, the lesson extends beyond the immediate classroom and immediate environment by means of a transparency, diagrams, and drawings in the books. Teachers are accustomed to bringing things in. With Situational Reinforcement books, these things are supplied as part of the text. The students describe these pictures and diagrams, tell stories about them, answer questions about a situation similar to one they practiced in the classroom, but now it is in a foreign context with native speakers depicted. By a process of synthesis and accretion the students' vocabulary and linguistic ability are gradually being broadened. Next, the student is given readings about native speakers and

the culture as seen from within that culture and not as curiosities that strike a foreigner's fancy. The reading builds on and expands the vocabulary and structures previously learned in the chapter in the classroom. You have thus progressed from the students' immediate environment that was discussed in direct discourse (questions and answers) to a foreign context that is learned about through another language skill, reading. There is a transfer and gradual progression from the American milieu to the foreign milieu, from one language skill to another in a natural way, with the emphasis always on personalizing communication.

I've been using the Situational Reinforcement method for two years now. I guess that I've always been using it, but now I am using the textbooks that do what I want them to do. Situational Reinforcement is not, however, a panacea; it does not solve all problems and is not perfect. After using many methods and texts for teaching foreign languages, the SR materials and texts are the ones I have been most satisfied with. There is no gimmick involved with them; there is nothing faddish about them.

It is curious to me that something so efficient, so practical, so interesting has not been developed before by a publisher. But I certainly am glad that this method and these texts exist now, because they have the students practicing the kinds of activities I think they should be practicing.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Situational Reinforcement materials have been developed by the Institute of Modern Languages, 2622 Pittman Drive, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910, and exist in English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, basic mathematics and basic electricity, as well as pre-vocational English and business English.

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